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## ABSTRACT

A second grade teacher's use of storytelling to teach English language skills to both native speakers and learners of English as a second language (ESL) is described. The technique combines the concept of comprehensible input, the importance of stories and storytelling to children, and a commitment to teaching writing skills. Early in the day, all the children would hear a story and express their likes and interests in it as a group. Later, the ESL teacher used parts of the story for reading or retelling, and the beginning ESL students and the other students drafted, revised, and completed their own stories. By Christmas, each of the children produced two bound books of stories with holiday themes, reflecting their individual levels of English skills. The stories showed substantial improvement in skills and considerable sophistication of structure and expression. They also illustrated that the ESL children are acutely aware of the rhythms and structures of English early in their language learning. The use of imagination is felt to have encouraged the children to extend their experience beyond the limits of their immediate surroundings and to have provided a point of departure for talk among themselves. (MSE)

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THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF CALGARY

STORIES AND THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE IN

A GRADE-TWO ESL CLASS

by

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at

NCTE in San Antonio, Texas  
23 November 1986

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Stories and the Teaching of Language in  
a Grade-Two ESL Class

There are a great many firmly held beliefs about the place of reading and writing in the English language syllabus for children in the primary years. For a number of years, many of us believed that an oral base was essential before literacy could be taught, a belief which resulted in two different kinds of practice. One was to delay reading and writing until the child had sufficient oral language proficiency that she would be able to understand the written language once it was "decoded." Another was to teach children to read and write in their native language first, and then to teach English literacy once some oral proficiency was established. In Canada, however, another quite opposite experience led us to question both practices.

In French early immersion classes, Anglophone children are educated entirely in French from kindergarten until grade three, and reading and writing are taught "on schedule" in grade one. Later, these children are able to "transfer" their skills to English without apparent difficulty and without direct instruction in Grade Three. The important point here, however, is the concurrent teaching of beginning oral French and beginning reading and writing in a second language context.

How is this possible? Actually, the answer lies very simply, in Stephen Krashen's terms, in the notion of comprehensible input. If the children understand the language around them, in whatever form, they can be taught to read and write from the beginning. This notion can, however, be translated into very dreary practice as when a teacher makes the input comprehensible but boring or situationally inappropriate. Children, for example, who must repeat, read and write unrelated (but comprehensible) sentences such as The cat has two ears and Bill has three sisters might be forgiven for declining to learn. Today I would like to describe how one teacher took the notion of comprehensible input, combined it with her very strong intuitions about the importance of stories and story-telling, added a firm commitment to the process approach to teaching writing, organized it all in thematically-based units, and taught her twenty four grade two pupils, 16 of whom had English as a second language.

From the beginning of the school year, this teacher emphasized reading and writing. She would tell you that she neglected most of the primary curriculum, but in fact, her thematic organization quite readily permitted social studies, science and religion. Her pupils fell into three groups: eight were true beginners in ESL, eight were low to mid intermediates, and eight were native speakers of English. All of the children remained in the classroom all day, and for half a day an ESL teacher came into the class to help wherever she was needed. For the first 30 to 45 minutes each morning, the children were together in a large group sitting on the carpet with both teachers. The classroom teacher, Mary Kennedy, would then read or tell them a story, using illustrations, puppets, props or whatever she could find to make the story understandable to all the children. She would then guide them in the retelling of the story and in discussions of the "I

likes" and "I wonders," frames which allowed them to express their own views and to question the author. In these early discussions, Mary was laying the foundations for their later sharing of their own writing.

After this period of storytelling or story-reading, the children would be divided into groups. The beginners would go with the ESL teacher to work on their reading and writing, and the intermediates and native speakers would go to their desks to begin their daily writing. Early in the year, before the children had much oral proficiency, the ESL teacher would take one to three short sentences adapted from the story they had heard - in sequence - and would read them to the children, and then have the children read them to her. She would then write the sentences on the board for them to copy, and they would then read the sentences they had written aloud to her. Later, she was able to leave words out of the sentences and the children would use these "frames" to recreate the stories they had heard. As they became more proficient, and for several of the children this was before Christmas, she was able to provide a full sentence frame for the rest of the story and they would recreate the rest of the story. The ESL teacher also began to use a modified Language Experience technique about this time; when it seemed that the children had been particularly involved in a story, she would ask one of them to retell it, and would write the child's version on the board as the text for the reading lesson. This was an extremely popular activity with the children, in part because the teacher made a big deal of the "authorship" of the story. Issues of plagiarism aside, the children took ownership of the stories and changed them at will.

## The Turkey

by QUE

Once upon a time there was a farmer who tried to catch a turkey. But the turkey ran too fast. So the farmer called his wife to help him to catch the turkey. Help! Help! Do you hear my shout? I tried to catch the turkey. But I can't catch him. So the wife came running and helped the farmer to catch the turkey. They ran and ran and ran. But they couldn't catch the turkey. So the wife called the daughter to help them to catch the turkey. The daughter came running to help her dad and mom to catch the turkey. They ran and ran and ran. But they couldn't catch the turkey. So the daughter called the son. The son came running and help his dad. Mom and his big sister. They ran and ran and ran and the son got the turkey. And they cooked the turkey for Thanksgiving Day.

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## The Big Sunflower

by GILLIAN

Once upon a time on a sunny day a farmer said, Help! Help! Do you hear my shout? I pulled the sunflower. But it wouldn't come out." Then he called his wife and they pulled and they pulled but the sunflower didn't come out. So they called for their little girl. Then she heled on to her mother and they pulled and they pulled. A little boy came and said, "cut it." So they did and they were happy.

## The Big Pumpkin

by CATHY

Once upon a time there was a farmer that tried to pull the pumpkin off the vine. The farmer shouted, Help! Help! Do you hear my shout? I pulled the pumpkin But it wouldn't come off. So the wife came to help. She took hold of the farmer. They pulled and they pulled but they couldn't pull it off. So the wife called the son. Help! Help! the wife shouted to the son. We tried to pull the pumpkin off the vine but we couldn't. So the son came to help. The son took hold of the wife, the wife took hold of the farmer and the farmer took hold of the pumpkin and finally it came off.

## How Did the Dolphin Get Her Big Mouth

by QUE

Once in a land there lived a big dolphin who had a little mouth. One day the dolphin swam to the sea and saw a giant whale. He said in a big voice "What are you doing here anyways?" And the dolphin said, "Never mind." The whale was very mad. "O.K. I'll bite your mouth a little while." Then the dolphin said, "Let me go." Then the whale let her go. When the dolphin swam back to her house she said, "Hurray! At last I've got my big mouth."

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(Untitled)

by JILLIAN

There once was a hippo who had a problem. her problem was that she didn't know her name. One day a little girl came to visit. She said, "What is your name?" Th hippo said, "i don't know." So she began to guess. Then she came up with a name. She said, "Is it Hellen?" "I don't know." So the little girl said to it's owner "Is her name Hellen?" "Yes", said her owner. So she told the hippo. Then th hippo was happy.

## How the Monkey Got His Long Arms

by CATHY

Once in the jungle there lived a monkey that had short arms. One day the monkey wanted to go for a climb up the trees since the monkey could not swing. But when he got to the top, a tiger said to him, "How come you have short arms"? "Never mind about that." The tiger got very mad. He bit the monkey by his arms and let him hang. Then the monkey's arms started to stretch. The monkey's arms grew longe and longer. After the tiger let go of the monkey's arms hurt. The monkey walked to the ocean. Then when he got there he put his aching arms in the water. After a while it got better. He liked his long arms. He could do lots of things like swinging he could't do with short arms and picking bananas with out climbing trees and that made him happy. On his way home he shouted, "Horray At last I've got my long arms".

In the meantime, the intermediate ESL children were busily becoming authors. They were drafting, revising, sharing, and producing final published pieces which at first bore a striking resemblance to the stories which they had read or had heard from their teacher. Despite this resemblance, however, the stories produced by the children bore marks of originality. The stories written by three children in response to "The Big Turnip" illustrate:

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Handout: Three stories (Que, Jillian, Cathy)  
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Notice the sophistication of the sentence structures and how faithful the children are to the structure of the story and to some of the devices for supporting that structure. At the same time, each child has chosen to tell a slightly different tale.

One of their favorite stories during the year was "How the Elephant Got His Trunk," one of Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories. This story found its way into their writing in various ways:

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Handout: Three stories (Cathy, Que, Jillian)  
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By Christmas, all children in the class had published two bound books (each!), one with a Halloween theme and the other a book of Christmas stories. For the beginners, the first book was largely a picture book with their (sometimes-dictated) captions, but the second had a great deal more print. For the intermediates and native speakers, the first book was a collection of their best writing, mostly within the Halloween theme, but for many, the second book was a first attempt at writing chapters. I have

## The Long Trip

by THUY

[Christmas]

In the morning, Joseph and Mary got a letter from Ceasar saying that they had to go back to Bethlehem to be counted. When Joseph went to get a donkey for Mary she was packing food like bread, apples, corn, cakes, and some wheat to eat on the way. Joseph found a donkey for Mary to ride on at last. The donkey was very strong. That is why Joseph chose him to carry Mary on his back. When they were in the middle of the road Mary got pregnant and Joseph was happy at first, but when they got to Bethlehem Joseph was sure worried. Mary and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem and Mary's stomach hurt because Jesus wanted to come out of her stomach so he could see the world around him. They tried to find a place to stay but there were no places for them to stay but a nice old man let them stay in his stable to sleep over night. Mary and Joseph like the stable very much. One day Jesus came out of Mary's stomach and one of the stars started to shine brightly in the air. All of the people saw the star and they followed it to see what happened there. When they people were there they saw Jesus the baby King.

chosen one chapter from the Christmas book of a Vietnamese girl named Thuy, who in September could write only the shortest of sentences with a great deal of effort. This piece is the second chapter of Thuy's nativity story and in it we can see her beginning to grapple with several issues - detail and audience among them. Notice the list of food and the careful chronology. Her awareness of audience turns up in the middle of her chronology when she realizes that she has forgotten a crucial detail that her audience might notice, and she writes a sentence which the priest, to whom Thuy read the story, has not yet forgotten.

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Read Thuy's story called "The Long Trip"

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I think you will agree that the samples of children's writing which you have seen are quite remarkable for grade two. They are not particularly remarkable for this class, however, but very typical. The reasons this teacher was so successful with this group of children lies partly, I believe, in the time she devoted to stories and story-telling. In listening to stories read aloud even before they can read themselves, children are already beginning to gain experience of the sustained, meaning-building organization of written language and of the rhythms and structures which characterize it. That ESL children are acutely aware of the rhythms and structures of English very early on is obvious in some of their early writing.

Also, through stories, children vicariously extend the range of their experience far beyond the limits of their immediate surroundings. They develop a much richer mental model of the world and an expanded vocabulary to use in talking about it. And then, of course, stories provide an

excellent starting point for collaborative talk between children and teachers and between children and other children, talk which helps children to re-explore their own experience in light of the story or, conversely, to use their own experience to interpret the story.

But perhaps for ESL children, the best reason for using stories goes back to the notion of comprehensible input - stories are, for children of this age an especially comprehensible form of input. They provide, particularly when they are well-taught using puppets and other kinds of visual aids to comprehension, a particularly salient form of contextualized language. We must remember that all too much of the language which occurs in the classroom is dislocated in both time and place - we have a nasty habit of talking about things or events that are not present. But in the acquisition of their first language, children do spend a great deal of time talking about ongoing activity or about events about which they have some prior knowledge. They have the context of situation to help them understand what is meant. If we can provide this kind of context in the classroom without attempting to replicate the situation of first language acquisition, for our learners are now older, more sophisticated, and able to cope with more basic language functions in their native tongues, then we are more apt to be successful. It is my contention that stories provide this kind of context.